

FIFTY MILLION FRENCHMEN

by Anonymous/Unlisted

COPYRIGHT

This material was originall published by St. John Publications in *Canteen Kate #1* June of 1952. It has since fallen into the public domain and may be utilized by any persons for any purposes. Transcription by Nathan DiYorio, use without permission or credit.

FIFTY MILLION FRENCHMEN

by Anonymous/Unlisted

Kate had a hunch that something was up when Major Herringbone stepped into the canteen with a very smug smile.

"Katie," the major said as he flopped down on a stool by the counter, "I think your promotion is long overdue."

"Promotion?" chirped Kate in bewilderment. "I don't catch. Put it in simpler language, Sir. Like — do you mean I'm to be transferred?"

"Not from this base. No ma'm!" The major was very emphatic. "You might call it upgraded if the word promotion doesn't appeal to you," he added with a coy wink.

Kate swung behind the counter and walked up behind the soda taps until she was facing him. Kate didn't like to be kept in suspense.

"Okay. Let's hear the news," she blurted out.

Kate braced herself against the edge of the stainless steel sink for the shuddering announcement.

"Wouldn't you like to leave this enlisted men's canteen and work in the officers' club?" the major asked in a persuasive tone that almost fooled Kate for an instant.

"No, sir. I would not," Kate said flatly. "Of course, if that's an order," she added glumly, "I'll obey."

"Come, come, Katie!" the major wheedled. "Show some *esprit de corps*!"

"What might that be?" Kate said, squinting at him sharply.

"It's a French expression," Major Herringbone told her. "Giving a literal translation it means spirit of the corps. In military usage it is applied the same as you would use the word enthusiasm when speaking of members of a group."

"It sounds terrible to me," Kate tossed back at him. "But I suppose fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong. When do I start?"

"This noon," the major said, getting off the stool. "Report to Lieutenant Martin. He will inform you of your duties." Before Kate could question him about the latter data, Major Herringbone left.

"I've got troubles," Kate moaned as she slipped off her apron. Her remark was overheard by the marines who were crowding in on the wake of Herringbone's departure. They asked her what was the trouble, and she gave it to them straight. "The brass wants me over at Wonderland."

"But you can't do this to us, Katie!" a big PFC whined. "We need you here! Who's gonna take your place? A messman in a white coat?"

"We had one of those once before," a hardfaced private groaned.

And as the number one controversy flamed anew, Kate slipped quietly around the edge of the crowd and made her way outside unnoticed.

It didn't take her fifteen minutes to discover why the boys called the Officers' club "Wonderland." The building was crawling with ninety-day wonders.

They called her "sweetheart" and "miss" and all the other names she didn't like such as hostess, sister and kid. All the boys back at the canteen had always addressed her as Kate, and before the day was over she had begun plotting to get back with the enlisted men.

She broke a few plates, spilled a few glasses, but none of the officers seemed to mind. They pushed each other aside to take turns helping her pick up the pieces.

At chow time when the place was emptied, Lieutenant Martin, a smug, efficient man, sent her on an errand to the commissary. En route she ran into Marine Private Rocky Sampson, a battlefront veteran serving his second enlistment. Rock's face was as hard as the boulders on Heartbreak Ridge. At the top of his endless gripe list were second lieutenants of the pre-combat variety.

"You don't look happy, Kate," he rasped in a toneless whisper. "Want me to blow up that joint tonight so you can come back to our canteen?"

Kate stopped and took his big, calloused hand. Her nimble mind sprang into action. Here was the man to help her. If she gave the word, he wouldn't hesitate to drive an M-26 tank through the club building at the height of the evening rush spell. But destruction of a less drastic nature could serve her purpose.

"Juggle a few nice, full garbage cans over here tonight after closing time," she told him, "and empty them under the screened verandah. Mother Nature will do the rest."

"Leave it to me, Kate!" Rocky said with a grin. "I'll really load the pig feed under that porch!"

When Kate came back to the club after chow she was carrying a sharp-nosed pair of scissors in the pocket of her skirt. They were small enough to be covered by her palm. At every opportunity that night she would back up to the screened panels along the verandah, jab the point of the scissors into the screen and then spread the blades to stretch the screen wire. In each spot this would leave a hole large enough for a fly to enter without retracting his landing gear.

Major Herringbone showed up just before closing time. He tapped Kate's shoulder and said, "Your presence has livened up the place, my dear. I knew I could depend on you to show real *esprit de corps*."

Kate rolled into her bunk that night and prayed that Rocky's special garbage detail would hit no snag. In the morning he was the first person to greet her when she left her billet. "Everything went okay, Kate!" he said with a deep chuckle. "Soon as the sun gets hot, you'll need to wear a gas mask in that joint."

Kate winked at him, and went off to breakfast.

A couple of yardbirds were mopping up the club when Kate showed up to help Lieutenant Martin with the accounts and requisitions. The faint aroma of garbage was already afloat on the breeze. Martin went out in the forenoon, and Kate sat back to let Mother Nature take her course.

Before noon a noxious odor enveloped the immediate surroundings. House flies, horse flies, fruit flies and many other varieties came in squadrons! The verandah screen was black with them, and the more adventurous ones found their way through the holes Kate had punched through the screen.

Lieutenant Martin returned, holding his nose with his left hand and fanning away flies with his right. Kate was sitting between two electric fans for protection. "I hate this awful place!" she groaned. "Another day here and you'll have to send me to the infirmary!"

Nervous perspiration broke out on Lieutenant Martin's face. "I'll speak to Major Herringbone, Kate. He should be along any moment now. Oh, here he comes!"

Herringbone fought his way through the attack formations of winged insects, thinking he would find safety inside the screen door. He yipped, clawed at his neck and in general behaved in no way becoming to an officer. Kate swallowed hard to keep from laughing. Then with a straight face she stood up and came before him. "Sorry, Major, but I've lost my *esprit de corps*. I can't stand this place any longer. You'll have to break me one grade. I'm going back to the enlisted men's canteen where the air is sweeter and the flies are fewer."

She was gone before Herringbone could untangle his tongue. He brushed the flies away from the screen to obtain visibility, and watched Kate traipsing away. "She can't do this to us, Lieutenant! Of course, she'll be back. She's only taking French leave until we've eliminated the source of her complaint. Er, have you determined yet what it may be?"

"Garbage," said Lieutenant Martin. "I'm afraid your idea was not popular with the enlisted men. I shall make a thorough investigation."

But Lieutenant Martin's probe went no further than a brief session with Kate at the canteen a short while later. "Did you see or have you heard any report of a marine dumping garbage cans under the porch of the officers' club?" he asked her.

"A marine?" Kate asked innocently. "Why, no. But you can tell Major Herringbone I did see a Frenchman. I believe his name was Alphonse. He was selling perfume, and when I refused to buy from him he said, 'Just you wait, M'amselle!' Well, I waited, and you see what happened. The Frenchman got his revenge!"

Lieutenant Martin gave Kate a frightened look as he hurriedly backed out the canteen door, and she hasn't seen him since!